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UNCLAS KATHMANDU 000312

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SA/INS AND DS/IP/SA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [NP](#)

SUBJECT: NEPAL: MAOIST STRIKE CLOSES CENTRAL NEPAL;  
FIGHTING IN MID-WEST

REF: KATHMANDU 0288

11. (U) The Maoist-enforced "bandh," or general strike, called for central Nepal, including Kathmandu, on February 17 was well observed in the capital. Slightly more shops were observed open and vehicles operating in Kathmandu than during the February 12 closure (Reftel). There were few reports of violence in the city. In the morning a socket bomb near a busy intersection in the eastern part of the city damaged two vehicles and blew out the windows of a local business, but no injuries were reported. In the south-central district of Nawalaparasi, suspected Maoists killed Khem Narayan Foujdar, a former Nepali Congress (Democratic) member of the National Assembly (the Upper House of Parliament) and a district political chairman. The Embassy received no bandh-related complaints from American citizens.

12. (U) According to press reports, the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) engaged the Maoists at Kotwada in the mid-western district of Kalikot in what may turn out to be the biggest battle since the end of the ceasefire in August. The engagement, which was reported to have begun late on February 16, continued for at least part of the following day. Initial fatality figures of at least 35 Maoists and 1 RNA officer killed may rise as more information becomes available. There was some speculation that the Maoists may have massed in an effort to disrupt King Gyanendra's planned series of public receptions in the Maoist heartland (Reftel). Press accounts suggest that paratroops were airlifted to the site to engage the Maoists.

13. (SBU) Comment: After an unusually long hiatus, today's bandh is the third for Kathmandu's generally compliant population in as many weeks. Yet another closure reportedly is being planned for February 25-29. This latest spate of bandhs, however, has not been accompanied by nearly the usual level of pre-strike violence (bombings, arson, sabotage) the Maoists typically have used to intimidate the general public in years past. The marginally higher number of businesses open and vehicles running today could indicate that fear of the risk of non-compliance is beginning to fade. With no notable recent victories against the security forces to their credit, the Maoists' press coverage has been limited of late to the occasional hit-and-run ambush and serial strike-calling. If the Maoists move ahead with the Feb. 25-29 strike as planned, we expect that public patience will not last for such an extended and costly duration.

MALINOWSKI